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Printed on recycled paper.

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PIBS 3340

what can I do to help?

Here are a few things you can do to keep Ontario's waters drinkable, fishable and swimmable:

- Don't pour old paints or dirty oil down the sewer. Many of the toxic ingredients will pass right through the sewage treatment plant and into the lake. Take them to your local household hazardous waste depot instead.
- Whenever possible, replace hazardous household products with less toxic, biodegradable alternatives. For instance, use baking soda and water instead of caustic oven cleaners.
- Is your septic system working properly and is it big enough to handle your family's needs? Have your septic tank inspected every two years and pumped out when necessary.
- Don't waste clean drinking water. Put a new washer in that leaky faucet. Take short showers instead of long baths. Don't overwater your lawn.
- Stoop and scoop after your pet. The droppings carried by storm water into lakes and rivers add to the bacterial pollution that sometimes close our beaches.

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how are we doing

Ontario
Ministry of Environment
and Energy

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we all have questions

For more than 20 years, the Ministry of Environment and Energy has worked with industry, municipalities, local groups and individuals to find the answers to our most crucial environmental questions. Together, we have celebrated some notable successes. And together we must face and overcome some difficult challenges.

Ensuring Ontario's waters are drinkable, swimmable and fishable means everyone has a role to play. The ministry sets standards and monitors water quality across the province. We have forged innovative partnerships with the private sector to voluntarily prevent or reduce discharges. We approve and oversee water treatment and pollution control efforts, and we enforce the environmental laws of Ontario. This brochure describes how we are doing and what still

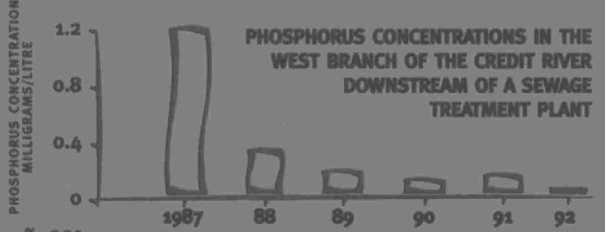
what is water pollution?

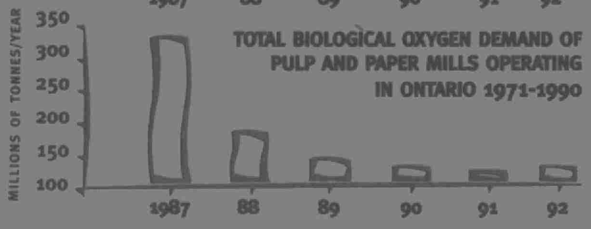
Water is considered polluted whe its intended use by humans or other living organisms is impaired Whether dumped into the sewer, trucked to a landfill or puffed out smokestack, pollutants can accumulate to dangerous levels in our lakes and rivers.

Potential sources of water pollution include more than 20,00 large and small industries that discharge their treated wastes to municipal sewers or directly to Ontario's waterways. Rural rivers and streams can be polluted by fertilizers, pesticides, manure and septic tank wastes, while urban beaches are threatened by sewag polluted storm water and road sal Hydroelectric dams, road building and mines can also cause water problems.

are things getting better? Or worse?

Much better. The results of our water pollution prevention efforts have been impressive. For instance, the petroleum industry has cut the release of its wastewater pollutants by more than 90 per cent over the last 20 years. Pesticide use across the province is down by 30 per cent. Phosphorus loadings into Lake Erie have been cut in half. The amount of mercury, PCBs, dioxins and other toxics measured in the eggs of herring gulls nesting around the Great Lakes has dropped by some 90 per cent since the early 1970s. And the situation will continue to improve. Under the Canada-Ontario Agreement on the Great Lakes, we are working to virtually eliminate the discharge of 30 different persistent toxic substances.

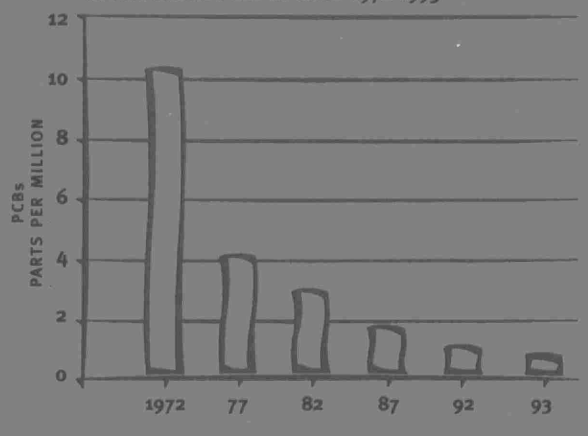

PHOSPHORUS CONCENTRATIONS IN THE WEST BRANCH OF THE CREDIT RIVER DOWNSTREAM OF A SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT


TOTAL BIOLOGICAL OXYGEN DEMAND OF PULP AND PAPER MILLS OPERATING IN ONTARIO 1971-1990

should I eat the fish?

That depends on the fish, and where you caught it. For more than 23 years we have been analyzing fish for toxic chemicals and publishing the results in our "Guide to Eating Ontario Sport Fish." Since the mid-1970s, the levels of PCBs, mercury and other harmful contaminants have dropped dramatically, but you should still refer to the guide. It offers consumption guidelines for the most popular sport fish caught in hundreds of locations. For example, contaminant levels in Lake Erie are so low there are few restrictions. Cautions have been set for only the largest catfish, carp and freshwater drum.

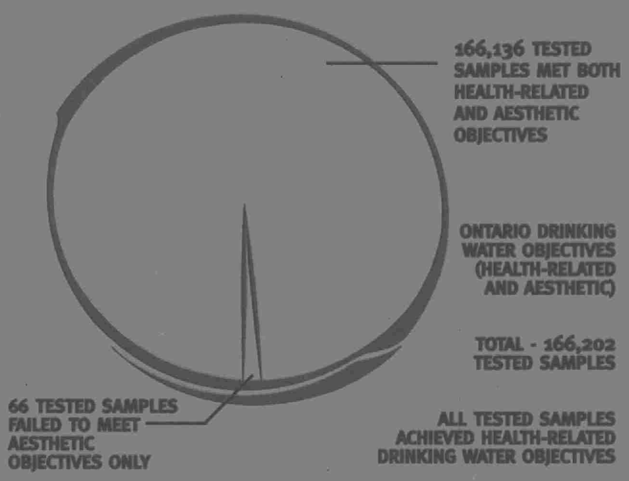
LAKE ONTARIO AT THE CREDIT RIVER
MEAN ANNUAL PCBs IN COHO 1972-1993



should I drink my tap water?

Go ahead and drink it. The drinking water treated and distributed locally across Ontario is just fine. Hundreds of thousands of tests have uncovered only a handful of higher than normal readings and these pose no threat to human health. Sometimes, the water may smell or taste a little different, but that's usually caused by naturally-occurring algae. On the rare occasions we detect a potential health problem, we advise the local medical officer of health. To keep Ontario's tap water safe and clean, the province has invested $1.5 billion since 1990 in upgrading local water and sewage treatment systems and building new plants.

RESULTS OF DRINKING WATER SURVEY 1985-1992



is my well water safe?

We are keeping a close watch on Ontario's wells because once groundwater is polluted, it can be difficult and extremely expensive to clean up. The location and construction of a well are also important considerations in preserving the quality of its water. About 2.8 million Ontario residents get their drinking water from private or municipal wells. They also water their livestock, irrigate their fields, supply their factories and fill their swimming pools with groundwater. If you have any concerns about the quality of your well water, contact your local public health unit which will provide a bacteriological analysis free of charge.

are Ontario's lakes dying?

Detergents, manure, sewage and fertilizers can all overstimulate the growth of algae and other water plants. By cutting the loadings of phosphorus and other nutrients, we have brought ailing lakes and rivers back to health. The most compelling evidence? The sports and commercial fisheries, that had almost disappeared from some lakes, are making a comeback.

Today, the quality of Ontario's lakes and rivers -- and the fish that live in them -- is monitored at some 700 sampling stations. But while the open waters are in pretty good shape, contaminants can linger in the muddy bottoms of harbours and marshes.

should I swim in my lake?

In most places and at most times, the answer is yes. Beach clean-up programs are starting to pay off and "no swimming" warnings have been posted at less than 11 per cent of Ontario's 1,100 monitored swimming areas. The beaches at Port Dalhousie and St. Catharines have been declared safe for swimming for the first time in 20 years. And beaches have reopened in Hamilton, Collingwood and Toronto.

However, full recovery will take time. To combat the major sources of contamination, we are expanding sewage treatment plants, building holding tanks to store sewage overflow, and separating storm and sanitary sewers. We are also supporting more than 2,600 local projects to protect rural beaches, upgrading manure storage systems and fencing cattle out of stream beds.

what are the challenges for the future?

Over the past 40 years, new sewage treatment plants and industrial pollution control systems have done much to reduce the major pollutants in Ontario's waterways. Whether it's a household septic tank or a huge industrial treatment centre, everyone who discharges wastewater into the environment must comply with Ontario's strict requirements.

The province's tough, new clean water regulations are targeted at the virtual elimination of the remaining persistent toxics discharged directly by large companies or indirectly by the thousands of smaller firms hooked up to one of Ontario's 400 sewage treatment plants.

Our Pollution Prevention Pledge Program is chalking up impressive results. More than 150 companies have voluntarily accepted the challenge of cutting their release of toxic chemicals in half by 1995.

We are helping local committees of government, industry and community representatives clean up 16 "areas of concern" on the Ontario side of the Great Lakes. (Water quality improvements allowed us to drop Collingwood harbour from the list in 1994.) The clean up of past pollution problems will remain an environmental priority well into the next century.